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Experiences of Residents of a Small South-Eastern Town with Local Politics

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## EXPERIENCES OF RESIDENTS OF A SMALL TOWN

### Abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine the effects local governments have on individuals living within their jurisdictions. This was done using an ethnographic case study of a small south-eastern town in the mid-Atlantic region. Data were gathered from both quantitative sources and interviews conducted by the researcher. Participants were chosen based upon their residency or employment within the town, and were asked how the local government had affected them. In order to ensure anonymity, any identifiers were changed. Interview data was coded according to how the participant responded, and then analyzed by the researcher in conjunction with the quantitative data gathered in order to identify any possible trends. The research indicated that, due to relatively unchecked power and relative anonymity due to the small size of the town, the local government was more likely to serve as a detriment rather than a benefit to the citizens of the town. However, due to the nature of this study, the results of the research conducted cannot be applied to other local governments. More research must be done on this topic in order to identify whether the results of this study are isolated or part of a larger trend.

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### Experiences of Residents of a Small South-Eastern Town with Local Politics

The dynamics of local and national politics differ significantly. Local politicians are able to impact many personal aspects of citizens' everyday lives. Local politicians arguably hold more power over citizens' perceptions of national government than representatives of national government do. Additionally, local politicians are able to remain relatively anonymous outside of their community. Few individuals, including those working in higher positions of state or federal government, know who they are. The relative power over local citizens combined with the anonymity of being a local politician make for a unique dynamic which has had little research done. This research inquiry employed a qualitative ethnographic case study approach to accurately evaluate the effects local politicians have on local residents. The researcher assessed actions of local officials and their impact on the town's citizens, then gathered data on citizens' views regarding any corruption. For this study, a small south-eastern town in the mid-Atlantic region was chosen. This town was chosen due to its proximity to the researcher, its low population density, and clearly documented cases of electoral fraud, making it an appropriate choice for this inquiry. While research has been completed on the effects of national government and individuals in high ranking positions, little research has been done on the effects local politics have on individuals living in their jurisdictions. This case study aims to evaluate the experiences of residents in a small south-eastern town in North America have had with local government in order to better understand and describe the effect local politics has on their citizens.

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### Literature Review

#### Research

Ryan Ceresola, a researcher with the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, authored “Unsupervised, Ensnared, Relational, and Private: A Typology of Illinois’ Corrupt Women,” which analyzed the relation between gender and corruption in small towns within Illinois. This paper addresses the stereotype that women are less likely than men to become corrupt, then addresses findings contrary to this belief. Women are just as likely, if not more so, than men to become corrupt. Women generally were found guilty of political corruption when they were using this corruption to benefit themselves or their families. A significant number of women were found to have committed corruption when in absolute power, usually through embezzlement. Most women also ended up being involved in a much larger scandal when arrested (Ceresola, 2015).

Researcher Stuart White with Stanford University, defines police corruption and discusses possible solutions. White looked at various cases of police corruption throughout the United States and analyzed similar trends. Police corruption is due to multiple factors, which White proposes as being police training and budgetary incentives. Police training puts the officer’s safety as being above an officer’s responsibility to the safety of citizens. This creates the mentality that police are above enforcing the law in almost every situation, regardless of safety. Police are given incentives for finding contraband when looking into a case. This can result in police purposefully planting contraband on individuals or estates in order to gain incentives such as money or supplies for departments (White, 1999).

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Professor Charles Ruff of the Georgetown University Law Center examines practices of federal prosecution with respect to local corruption (Ruff, 1977). His paper, a prime example of a case study concerning local corruption, can be used to identify possible loopholes local officials can use to hide from federal inspections. This research would primarily be used as a comparison against practices of local town officials and their possible methods of corruption.

Author Ralph Weisheit of the Illinois State University looks at connections between crime and methods of policing in small towns in America. His book, *Crime and Policing in Rural and Small-Town America*, used a meta-analytical study to compare the prevalence of crimes in small towns, and how police who are charged with arresting individuals of these crimes are treated afterwards. If they are given incentives based on types of crimes (speed traps, drug busts), and if these towns then have a high prevalence of these types of crimes, it would indicate there may be some form of corruption occurring within the police department, with police being motivated to plant fake crimes in order to get more incentives out of these programs (Weisheit, 2006).

A United Nations report on the case study of a Texas town's corruption analyzed illegal dealings between two town officials and a local land developer (Pritchard, 2005). Due to the large amounts of local land developments, contrasting the relative poverty of the town being studied, this case study can be used as a precedent for the research question.

### **Support for Method**

Researchers Bezlov and Gouney examine the relationship between organized crime and corruption in Europe. This paper finds organized crime is not perceived as being connected to corruption, but is more closely related to pressures being put upon law enforcement agencies.

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The researchers assert with a probability rate of 99% that organized crime has a significant impact on corruption in the efficiency of legal and judicial officials. Their work also outlines 19 indicators of organized crime and corruption, which include external property bribes, police asking for bribes, police accepting bribes, irregular payments in public contracts, favoritism in decision of public officials, and pervasion of money laundering through non-bank channels (Bezlov, Gouney, 2010).

A pamphlet published by the United States government in 1978 was one of the first documents detailing research specific to preventing political corruption in small towns. It outlines possible solutions and preventions for corruption in local government, and offers a look into what sort of local political corruption was occurring in the 1970's and how this corruption was perceived by the federal government (Ewing, Gregg, 1978). It offers a starting point for all subsequent papers and solutions for preventing corruption within local U.S. governments. This paper can be used to compare models of corruption in the past and models of corruption now, which can help to indicate which factors have changed, resulting in different types of corruption (i.e. Internet, access to cell phones, etc.) and which factors have remained, resulting in corruption that has spanned the decades (absolute power, etc.).

Researchers Glaeser and Saks of Harvard University look at connections between corruption and economic status, finding no significant connection between local corruption and economic status. Rather, this paper finds there is a significant correlation between local corruption and a lack of education. The higher the level of education within a community, the less likely political corruption is to occur. This is because education generally brings with it a greater respect for and understanding of the political system (Glaeser, Saks, 2004). This research can be used to compare the average level of education within the town being studied and the

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level of corruption found. This research sets a precedent for a significant relationship between the understanding of corruption by the citizens of a town based on the average level of education.

Researcher Kristen Kennedy of the University of New Hampshire discusses different types of embezzlement which can occur, such as misappropriation of assets and misrepresentation of financial statements, and different companies which have embezzled funds through a meta-analytical study of past cases of corporate fraud. This paper suggests fraud can be seen early by looking for controlling individuals who exhibit a strong desire for personal gain (Kennedy, 2012). The different types of embezzlement, though primarily done through companies and corporations, can also be used for corruption in small town governments.

University of Delaware researcher Tammy Anderson examines various types of property crime and their effects on localities. This paper defines property crime as being any sort of damage done to an individual's property (Anderson, 2002). This information can be used to help examine different types of crime occurring within the subject town of a case study. This information can also be used as questions to ask citizens of a town in order to see how citizens perceive crime and corruption versus the types of crime and corruption actually occurring.

Ronald Hill researches attachments homeless women have to certain objects which they view as being "home" for the *Journal of Consumer Research*. This paper was selected primarily due to the methodology of the data collection. The researcher utilized prolonged engagement and persistent observation, which he did by volunteering at the designated women's homeless shelter every weekend in order to become a regular member of the community (Hill, 1991). This allowed the researcher to gather accurate data with regards to the opinions and thoughts of subjects being observed.

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Researcher Sarah Beasley looked at the effect the local culture in which first generation college students were raised had on their college careers. This research used interviews, newspapers, and books to analyze the culture in which these students were raised (Beasley, 2011). This research method of using both primary and secondary data allows for context when analyzing data in an ethnographic study.

Polo Lemphane of the University of Cape Town observed the results of how interacting with digital media at a young age affect children's interactions with others both in and outside of school (Lemphane, 2012). This research demonstrated the effective nature of long-term and follow-up research when performing an ethnographic case study.

Eric Piel, a researcher at the University of Oregon, looks at the concepts of power and participation and how they are intertwined in the examination of the urban planning systems in a Brazilian town. The method of gathering data, which is significant to this study, is a categorization of informal and formal data into four common 'themes' which served to identify the correlations between an individual's experiences and subsequent actions in their community (Piel, 1997). This method can be effectively used to identify common denominators between formal and informal interviews, thus allowing for greater analyses of the culture of case study subjects.

Author Merliin van Hulst studied the effect of local culture on small town government in the Netherlands. This research study goes in-depth into the meaning of culture and actions taken by individual. "Thin" descriptions can be used to very basically describe the action, while "thick" descriptions can be used to describe the various meanings behind these actions (van Hulst, 2008). Distinction between the two can have important implications for data gathered in an ethnographic case study



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### **Method**

Data collection took place from mid-November 2016 to late March 2017. For this research project, an ethnographic case study method was used. An ethnographic case study looks at a single “case” and gathers and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data on the culture of the case being studied. This method allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the town and the complicated relationship between a local government and the citizens living within its jurisdiction that would have been lost had another method been used. The research looked at the experiences of citizens of a small southeastern town in North America with respect to local politics. Interviews were conducted with both citizens and business owners of the town in order to establish the experiences and views of the citizenry. Information from public records, financial reports, and observations were used as data points to corroborate and follow up with data obtained during interviews. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed in conjunction with one another in order to better describe the makeup of the town and the effects of local politics on residents. Confidentiality was ensured by having participants sign a letter of informed consent, and identifying participants when collecting data by coding participants according to their relationship with the town using an assigned letter, and numbering participants according to the order they were spoken to. (Example: A1, B3, etc.) The names of the town and participants were changed in order to keep the data collected anonymous, and any other identifiers were changed in a like manner. Data collected was color coded according to the type of data collected and the individuals this data concerns. The data was then triangulated between the researcher, the Advanced Placement Research teacher, and another professional.

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### Findings

#### Background

Founded in the early seventeenth century, the town of Henderson initially experienced great prosperity from its harbor and the tobacco trade, making it politically and economically important on the national level. However, by the late eighteenth century, the harbor began to fill in with silt, resulting in a mass exodus of citizens to a more prosperous northern harbor town. By 1820, twenty families remained in Henderson as a result of being too poor to move out of the town. The majority of individuals born in Henderson today are descended from these twenty families. From the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, the town survived largely upon the money brought in by a local pyrite mine. Following the closure of the mine, individuals have largely found employment in local businesses or outside employers. In 2010, Henderson was 1.6 square miles, with 4,961 individuals living in the town (“[Henderson] town” 2016). The average level of education in Henderson is completion of high school (“[Henderson, State] Education” n.d.). The average household income in 2016 was \$57,111 (“[Henderson, State]” 2016).

#### Crime

Elizabeth Nobel, a museum director who commutes daily to Henderson from another town, relayed to the researcher that this inquiry should look into any possible relationship between the town mayor, Mason Whitlocke, and the local landfill. Nobel had, before losing her job, worked closely with both the mayor and the county. Nobel’s museum had repeatedly faced difficulties in maintaining the grounds due to debris from the local landfill landing on the grounds, which dirtied the surrounding area. While conducting research into interactions between the privately-owned Osborn Landfill and the town government of Henderson, the

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researcher discovered Osborn Landfill had been granted a vertical extension of fifty-five feet past the legal vertical limit on February 2, 2016, despite there being a public opposition to the landfill from many town residents due to public health concerns, as recorded in multiple public town meetings and local newspapers. A formal letter requesting the vertical extension from Osborn Landfill, Incorporated, was sent to the Henderson town council on June 10, 2015. From February 23, 2015 to September 24, 2015, Osborn Landfill, Incorporated, had donated a total of \$4,150 to Mayor Whitlocke's senate campaign fund. This sequence of events implies Whitlocke may have accepted a bribe from a private entity in exchange for political influence.

While analyzing Whitlocke's public senate finance records, the researcher noticed a pattern in donations made by Possum Management, Incorporated, which was the second highest donor to the campaign fund aside from Whitlocke himself. When the researcher attempted to find any record of the company aside from the campaign finances, the only record available was from the state corporation commission. Possum Management had only two employees listed, Aaron and Minerva Song, and an annual listed income of \$100,000. The address listed for the headquarters was located in a complex within Henderson, and the phone number listed was disconnected. The researcher went to the address listed, and found the apartment listed as the headquarters for Possum Management was not on the registry. The researcher did more research into Mr. Song, and found he owned six different companies, each with an annual income of approximately \$100,000, the same two employees, addresses listed at one of two different locations, and phone numbers listed with one of two different phone numbers. The researcher went onto a Henderson public record database, and searched for both phone numbers. The researcher found a letter from June 2015 from one Aaron Song informing the town council that work with a Millennial Center was moving forward, with one of the phone numbers listed as

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contact information. The researcher discovered Song owned a company called Millennial Center Development, LLC, and was the owner of two different business complexes within Henderson. The construction of Millennial Center faced significant opposition from residents of Henderson, with residents citing concerns of major businesses pushing out local businesses and disrupting the isolated atmosphere of the town in both town hall meetings and interviews with local newspapers. From November 2012 to mid-2014, town officials publicly opposed the construction of the Center. However, by June 2015, construction had been approved by the council and was listed in multiple public letters as being put on a “fast track” for development. From February 2015 to October 2015, a company owned by Song had donated \$14,000 to Mayor Whitlocke’s senate campaign fund, and sometime from mid-2014 to June 2015, the attitude of town officials towards another company owned by Mr. Song changed drastically.

The implications of this series of events are drastic. Aaron Song’s ownership of multiple companies with an income of approximately \$100,000 and little to no public record aside from their existence with the state corporation commission implies that some form of money laundering could be occurring. The major donations by a company owned by Mr. Song to Mayor Whitlocke’s campaign fund, and an apparent change of heart of town governmental officials towards another one of Mr. Song’s companies during the period of time in which Mr. Song donated this money implies Whitlocke accepted money from a private citizen in exchange for political influence. Elizabeth Nobel and two other participants, Johnathan Tronline and Eileen Brown, indicated to the researcher they would not find this exchange of money out of character for Whitlocke.

Overall, the actions taken by Mayor Whitlocke in conjunction with donations given to him by multiple private entities imply he’s guilty of a Class-4 felony (Acceptance of bribe by

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officer or candidate, 2006). Whitlocke appears to be influencing the town council of Henderson to take actions contrary to public opinion in exchange for monetary donations. This, combined with the fact that no town officials have taken public action against Whitlocke, has serious implications for the structure and culture of the government of Henderson. Whitlocke's apparent decision to change decisions made by the town government in exchange for advantages for a land developer mirrors the United Nations case study discussed in the literature, which would, based on this precedent, constitute corruption (Pritchard, 2005). During her interview, Nobel stated, "When...the mayor and...the folks that work directly with him [vote], it's always like a four to two voting process. So, not a lot really gets done as far as differences," (E. Nobel, personal communication, 8 February 2017). Eileen Brown supported this claim when speaking with the researcher, stating, "Nobody has the [courage] to confront anyone," while discussing the structure of the Henderson government (E. Brown, personal communication, 26 February 2017). There appears to be an extremely biased and hierarchical structure within the town government, with the mayor being the de facto decision and policy maker for town actions with little to no visible oversight. This can be accounted for when looking at the findings of Glaeser and Saks, who find a significant correlation between a low-level of education and corruption (Glaeser, Saks 2014). Given the relatively low levels of average adult education within Henderson, this hierarchical structure is likely to remain untouched.

### **Corruption versus Bullying in Local Government**

During her interview, Eileen Brown, a former office manager at a local museum in Henderson, informed the interviewer of an incident involving Mayor Whitlocke and the local police department.

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“[T]he last six months, the mayor has decided to remove the town manager, the check and balance person of the police department, and has made it so that the mayor himself is the end all be all for the police department. That takes away the system of checks and balances when it comes to the police department, and that’s a bad sign. So, and all of this happened on the heels of a event that happened last year, so it made it very obvious that all of this was done to make sure the power stayed with the mayor. The mayor was arrested because he was stealing the signs from the vice mayor during an election while the vice mayor was out of town going to his mother’s funeral. Everyone who was associated with that arrest was fired...They have removed people from the police department who have done a great deal of work and made a lot of really great changes in [Henderson]. At one point we had thirteen working police officers...now [we have] three. All of that is because of decision making happening at the council level. There appears to be some sort of attempt at a consolidation of power that is pretty much exclusively controlled by the council, removing the checks and balances, so that means that the possibility for corruption is heightened by 1000%,” (E. Brown, personal communication, 26 February 2017).

While researching the incident, the researcher found a piece Mayor Whitlocke wrote for a local newspaper, which stated he was, “Disappointed Vice-Mayor [Taylor]...[has] been uncooperative and disruptive on and off the dais and continually [advanced] partisan politics. Their actions have been to deceive the public,” (“[Henderson] mayor” 2016). The day of his arrest, Whitlocke requested the local newspaper take this piece down, which they complied with. Whitlocke’s decision to publish and subsequently take down this piece, coupled with his actions concerning his arrest and the campaign being run by his vice mayor, would make it appear as though

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Whitlocke was attempting to keep Taylor, who had previously opposed actions taken by Whitlocke, out of town government. This would corroborate the claims of a destruction of checks and balances within the Henderson government made by Brown. Such attempts to give Whitlocke unchecked power would constitute corruption as defined by researchers Ewing and Gregg, which has absolute power as a stipulation of corruption (Ewing, Gregg 1978).

When asked how her time in the town had changed or impacted her, Nobel stated,

“[O]ur museum closed down last weekend, and they’re restructuring it, and nobody gave us any indication of what that’s going to be... We were told... when they reopen... we can reapply, this affected [everyone that works with the museum]... we don’t know what’s going to happen when it happens... We had one person that wanted to take over the position, and he offered to do so. That made it really difficult because he really doesn’t understand what it takes, or how to do it.”

After being asked if she could relay who that individual was, Nobel said she would, “[R]ather not say,” (E. Nobel, personal communication, 18 February 2017). In an on-the-record, post interview discussion, Nobel relayed that the country historical commission, which funded the museum, had not been informed of the changes prior to them taking place. She also indicated Mayor Whitlocke, a member of the historical board of directors, had what she described as being an agenda. The sudden and drastic changes in how the museum was run, coupled with Nobel’s statements indicating there was an individual who wished to take over her position she would not identify, implies there may have been some form of prior strong-arming with respect to the struggle of power within how the museum was run on behalf of the town government. This apparent attempt on behalf of the Henderson government to take control over non-governmental entities would hold serious implications for the economy and culture of the town.

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While speaking with the researcher, Nobel relayed that Mayor Whitlocke had forced seventeen members of the local government to resign. Nobel informed the researcher that she had already spoken to a local newspaper about this, but that this information was unable to be published without corroboration from a fellow coworker, who refused to confirm this out of fear of retaliation. This incident would make it appear as though incidences of bullying within the government of Henderson were not uncommon, and could account for the reluctance on the part of some interviewees to not answer questions or identify individuals. There would appear to be a frequency with which members of the Henderson government were fired or forced to resign by Whitlocke which would indicate he is able to push out individuals who pose a threat to his power.

### **Inefficiencies**

Two participants spoke of the ineffective nature of Henderson government. While speaking with Alicia Washington, who moved to Henderson fifteen years prior and works for the state government, she stated, “I don’t know what purpose [Henderson] really serves. Having...the town inside of the county...I don’t see any extra services that I get because I’m a resident of the town that I would if I wasn’t,” (A. Washington, personal communication, 19 February 2017). Washington’s statements speak to the lack of involvement on behalf of the Henderson government with respect to the local community. During his interview, Johnathan Tronline, a local business owner, stated, “Local town government...doesn’t seem to keep staff long enough for one to start a project and follow it through to fruition,” (J. Tronline, personal communication, 21 February 2017). Tronline also relayed a story in which he was unable to publicly display his wares due to the enforcement of an obscure town ordinance which he later discovered did not exist. He called the incident, “Just basic harassment,” (J. Tronline, personal



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communication, 21 February 2017). These statements would indicate the government of Henderson is ineffective in providing services to individuals living in and contributing to the town, and indicate the past instances of “strong-arming” with the museum were not isolated.

Such ineffectiveness could negatively impact the way of life of the citizenry of Henderson, which can be seen in a number of ways, the most obvious of which being the quality of the roads being maintained by the town government, and the number of condemned houses on the main street of Henderson. There is a notable difference in the quality of town and state road maintenance; while state maintained roads appear to be upkept, roads maintained by Henderson are clearly neglected. The tar has become bleached and cracked, and potholes appear to have been hastily filled. However, the tar of the town hall parking lot is new and fresh, while tar of residential and main roads are extremely poor. Such neglect on behalf of the local government would indicate a sharp divide between the town and the Henderson government. When walking down Main Street in Henderson, one can clearly see a state of neglect. In addition to poorly upkept roads, eight out of the thirteen houses on Main Street are condemned. This would imply individuals operating within the government of Henderson are not working for the betterment of the town as a whole, which would be identified as a form of corruption under Weisheit’s definition (Weisheit, 2006).

### **Small Town Aspect**

In every interview, participants identified the “small town” nature of Henderson as being a significant part of the culture. When asked what about Henderson appealed to her, Nobel stated she enjoyed that it was a, “Small...town where everybody knew everyone. [That's] extra special,” (E. Nobel, personal communication, 18 February 2017). When asked what about Henderson appealed to him, Tronline stated, “I enjoy the small town feeling, I enjoy the colorful

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people that are in this town. Yeah, it's your typical American hometown," (J. Tronline, personal communication, 21 February 2017). When asked what appealed to her about Henderson, Brown stated she, "[Appreciates] a small town atmosphere," (E. Brown, personal communication, 26 February 2017). All of these individuals independently identified the "small town" atmosphere of Henderson as being one of the most compelling factors about the town, and more often than not, identified this as the only compelling factor about Henderson. The "small town" atmosphere can be identified as relative isolation from the rest of the county, a large, diverse, suburban area of nearly half a million individuals. However, this atmosphere of isolation, when interpreted in conjunction with the rest of the data gathered, would indicate an environment in which the actions of local government are able to proceed relatively unchecked. This can result in, as Brown put it, "People in small towns...[becoming] a little shortsighted and a little close minded," (E. Brown, personal communication, 26 February 2017). Such isolation could result in the culture of Henderson becoming separate from the mainstream in the extreme, to the point where the usual system of checks and balances is ignored.

### **Limitations and Sources of Error**

There are some limitations that merit mentioning with respect to this case study. Only one town was used in this study, meaning any implications or conclusions drawn from the data gathered cannot be immediately or directly applied to other towns or populations. The demographics of the area surrounding Henderson are unique to this region; any inferences drawn from this study cannot be applied to regions outside the Southeastern United States. However, as with any ethnographic case study, inferences regarding these data are applicable on a reader-by-reader basis.

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Sources of error within this study also merit mentioning. Data gathered depended upon individual interviews. While conducting these interviews, some participants appeared uncomfortable or unwilling to clearly answer questions without prompting from the interviewer. Participants may have lied due to discomfort or internal biases, resulting in inaccurate data. Despite all four interviewees describing some aspects of Henderson's government in a negative light, each interviewee, when not prompted by the interviewer for clarification, appeared to attempt to stress whatever positive aspects of Henderson they could while initially minimizing critical comments. This could have resulted in important data points not being reported or being reported with a bias towards the town government.

### **Sources of Bias**

There are significant sources of bias present within this study. I have lived in Henderson since I was born, and worked in the local museum from October 2015 to February 2017. During my time in Henderson, I've encountered many individuals who stated they feel as though the town government has been corrupt. When initially presenting my research question, my goal was to uncover some form of corruption. This means, while interpreting and collecting data, it must be acknowledged positive aspects of the town government may have been overlooked, and negative aspects of the town may have been exaggerated.

### **Implications and Suggestions for Further Research**

While this research clearly indicates a need for increased checks and balances on local government, there are other implications one can draw from these data as well. From an economic perspective, the lack of involvement of Henderson government in local life may have had a significant impact on outside investments in the town economy. Six of the major business

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centers in Henderson are listed as being “For Lease,” yet more are being planned for construction. This may not be an isolated trend among small towns. Further research into the effects an inactive town government can have on the economy of said town is necessary. A wider study on towns with similar demographics should be done in order to ascertain whether the implications these data have are part of a trend or are isolated.

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